



OPEN
 OXFORD POLICY
 ENGAGEMENT NETWORK

Oxford Policy Engagement Network (OPEN) Seed Fund 2025-26

Guidance for applicants

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1. Summary

The Oxford Policy Engagement Network (OPEN) Seed Fund, makes awards of up to £5,000 to enable researchers at the University of Oxford and public policy professionals anywhere in the world to collaborate to:

- Enable them to share evidence and support its use in policymaking;
- Improve their understanding of how research can inform policymaking, and develop the skills to catalyse that process; and
- Broaden and deepen their networks.

This scheme is funded through the University of Oxford's allocation from Research England's Policy Support Fund.

The earliest start date is 1 January 2026 and all project activity **must** be completed and funding spent by 30 June 2026.

All applications must include at least one researcher from the University of Oxford (Research Partner) and one policy professional from a policymaking organisation (Policy Partner). For help identifying a Research or Policy Partner, please [contact the Policy Engagement Team](#).

Academics and research staff employed by any department or faculty at the University and at any career stage can apply. Proposals from those new to, and experienced in, policy engagement are equally welcome. Those with college-only contracts must apply via a department or faculty. DPhil students can apply if they will have submitted their thesis and be awaiting examination at the point their project will commence, or as co-applicants. All proposals must include at least one Policy Partner.

Applications must be submitted by the Research Partner using the [Internal Research Award Management System](#) (IRAMS).

Researchers are advised to consult their departmental research support team in the first instance, not least to ensure they comply with any departmental eligibility criteria, approval processes, or guidelines.

All applicants are strongly encouraged to contact the Policy Engagement Team (researchandpublicpolicy@admin.ox.ac.uk) to discuss ideas for a potential application, as well as for advice on eligibility criteria, potential hosts at Oxford or in the policymaking community, and other related questions.

Proposals for up to £1,000 can be submitted at any time before 12:00 BST 18 May 2026. The call for proposals between £1,000 and £5,000 has now closed for the academic year 2025/26.

2. About the OPEN Seed Fund

Policy engagement is all about relationships: investing in them, maintaining them – and, from time to time, ending them¹. For some researchers and policy professionals, however, it can be difficult to know where start, or how to develop these relationships. Launched in partnership with the UK Civil Service Policy Profession, the OPEN Seed Fund makes it easier for potential partners to connect and begin to collaborate, share knowledge and expertise, so that, together, they can contribute to better policies that protect what is valuable and change the world for the better. This is central to the mission of [the Oxford Policy Engagement Network](#) (OPEN), a growing network of more than 1,200 research and policy professionals who share a vision of public policy powered by the world's best available research evidence and expertise.

¹ See Roche, C., Tomlin, A., & Krishna, U. (2020). [Monitoring, evaluation and learning for policy engagement: Approaches, questions and resources](#). University of Oxford

3. What can the OPEN Seed Fund be used for?

Partners may use the Seed Fund for

- **Exploratory conversations:** to participate in exploratory meetings or consultations with partners and other key stakeholders or improve dialogue between researchers and policy professionals to co-develop future collaborative projects
- **Workshops:** to run seminars or workshops that enable researchers and policy professionals to share evidence and expertise, and which support the uptake of research evidence in policymaking
- **Evidence synthesis:** to collaborate on synthesis of evidence from diverse sources, disciplines and contexts to inform policy debates, options or decisions, and approaches to filling gaps
- **Leveraging networks:** to establish, develop or leverage mutually accessible networks
- **Co-production of tools and resources:** to facilitate the uptake of research evidence in policymaking and co-development of approaches to monitoring, evaluation and scrutiny of policy

Activities that are **not** eligible include:

- Research consultancy
- Participation in academic conferences or seminars lacking clear engagement with policy professionals
- Studentships or internships for Research Council-funded DPhil students, where these are funded through Research Council Doctoral Training Grants.

Partners have used the Seed Fund to tackle challenges in the UK, e.g.,

- To develop policy around English as an Additional Language (EAL) for resettled refugee and migrant children through the study of EAL provision gaps in three cities in the UK;
- To better understand [the potential of electric vehicle car clubs in towns and villages to reduce ownership and use in more car-dependent communities](#);
- To improve integration and availability of data on people's understanding, attitudes, and interactions with nature;
- To better anticipate demand in Oxford for food aid during the COVID-19 pandemic;
- To strengthen the ethical framework for regional healthcare resource allocation in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic;
- To learn lessons from Violence Reduction Units for school exclusions after COVID-19;
- To improve language teaching in primary schools;
- To better understand [the impact of direct-to-consumer genetic testing on the NHS](#).

Partners have also tackled challenges outside the UK, e.g.,

- To strengthen [government capacity at state level in Brazil to develop and implement social and environmental policies and programmes](#);
- To guide investment by international organisations aimed at protecting children from impacts of climate change;
- To develop a better understanding of [the trade-offs involved in application of the concept of health security](#);
- To improve responses to the mobility needs of some of the poorest people in Istanbul, during and after the pandemic; and
- To develop a shared understanding of the impacts of COVID-19 on pastoral communities in Central Asia and elsewhere, and [exploring with them ways to mitigate those](#).

4. How can partners benefit?

Research Partners stand to learn more about the value of their skills and expertise to public policy, and enhance both; better understand how governments work, how they use evidence and how policy is made; and discover how to collaborate effectively with policy professionals at pace and in the face of widespread uncertainty.

Policy Partners may strengthen their understanding of research methods that can help model, test and improve policy solutions, as well as their understanding of, and ability to use, research evidence and expertise.

Both partners are likely to benefit through broadening and deepening their professional networks.

5. How will proposals be assessed?

A researcher-member of the OPEN Steering Group will chair the panel, which will include at least one researcher in another academic division, and may include members of professional services staff and of the policymaking community. The quorum is 4.

The panel will aim to support high quality proposals which show (a) strong potential to accelerate and deliver impact in policy arising from excellent research and (b) commitment to developing productive collaboration with policy partners. The panel will score applications on a scale from 1 to 6, mindful of the following criteria:

- **Relevance to at least one public policy challenge identified as such by the policy partner(s)**, reflected in: Policy Partner's in statement of support; proposed goal and outcomes
- **Potential to advance policy professionals' understanding, to clarify or expand the range of options open to them**, reflected in: Policy Partner's in statement of support; proposed goal and outcomes
- **Effectiveness of project design and methods, reflecting input of partner(s) throughout project**, reflected in: clear, logical pathway from activities, via outputs, to outcomes and goal that are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound; identification of key assumptions, risks, and issues that may affect implementation
- **Effectiveness of proposed arrangements for monitoring, evaluation, and learning, and the potential for other researchers and policy professionals to learn from the proposed project**, reflected in: provision for iterative learning; opportunities to share learning; theory of change
- **Value for money**, reflected in: articulation of measurable outcomes; clear identification and justification of all costs; identification and mitigation of financial risks; quantified contribution (cash or in-kind) by Policy Partner (at least 10% of amount requested) and other partners

Proposals may relate to continuation of ongoing or earlier activity, or substantially new activities. The former must clearly demonstrate the added value of further funding and the potential for timely outcomes, which might include those that are:

- Instrumental: changes to plans, decisions, behaviours, practices, actions, policies;
- Conceptual: changes to knowledge, awareness, attitudes, emotions;
- Capacity-building: changes to skills and expertise;
- Enduring connectivity: changes to the number and quality of relationships and trust; or
- Culture/attitudes towards knowledge exchange and towards research impact itself.²

To view the guidance provided to panel members, please see the file "OPEN funding schemes scoring definitions" on the [OPEN Seed Fund webpage](#).

6. How will funding be allocated?

Eligible applications will be assigned, based on their average score, to one of three bands. The panel may moderate scores to ensure that assessment criteria have been applied consistently, paying particular attention to applications that have received a wide range of scores and those that may be close to band boundaries.

² See Meagher, L., Edwards, D. (2020, March 2). [A framework to evaluate the impacts of research on policy and practice](#).

Should there be insufficient funds to support all fundable proposals, to increase equality of opportunity and reduce the effect of unconscious bias, including as to the relative importance of different policy priorities, funds will be allocated on a random basis:

- Firstly, to other applicants in Band A
- Next, to those in Band B, until insufficient funding is available to satisfy the next applicant.

The funding available for the OPEN Seed Fund in 2025/26 is at least £60,000. Feedback from the panel review will be available on request.

7. Who can apply?

Applications must include a Research Partner and Policy Partner. Applications must be submitted by the Research Partner.

Research Partner

The Research Partner must be an academic or researcher employed by a department or faculty at the University, or by a college, applying via such a department or faculty. If the Research Partner has a contract of employment that lasts more than six months beyond the project end date, they may also serve as Principal Investigator (PI), otherwise they should serve as a Co-applicant and identify an eligible academic or researcher to serve as PI. This is because the PI is responsible for ensuring delivery of two project reports, which are due up to six months following project completion (see below). Clinical Research Fellows may apply if they have completed their DPhil and hold a contract of employment with a department or faculty. DPhil students can apply as Research Partner if they will have submitted their thesis and be awaiting examination at the point their project will commence, or as co-applicants.

Awards can only be held in departments or faculties, not in colleges. Researchers with college-only contracts, and those from Gardens, Libraries and Museums, must apply via a department or faculty, with a member of that department or faculty as a Co-applicant.

If the Research Partner moves to another university during the course of the project, this funding will not transfer with them.

Policy Partner

The Policy Partner must be a policy professional. In most cases, the most appropriate Partner is likely to be employed in a policymaking organisation, such as a devolved or national assembly, civil service, statutory body, or multilateral organisation. About two thirds of successful applications for OPEN funding involve such a partner. In some cases, the most appropriate partner may be employed in a think-tank or other civil society organisation.

Applicants must clearly explain their choice of Policy Partner, and their partner's role in proposed activities and outputs, and achievement of proposed outcomes and goal.

Co-applicants

Applications **may** also include co-applicants:

- Those employed or studying at the University of Oxford, including; DPhil students; teaching staff; museum staff; or research facilitators and other professional services staff; and
- External partners in academia, the public, private or voluntary sector.

Retired and Emeritus Fellows, as well as Master's students, are ineligible.

For information regarding support for finding partners, please see Section 9.

Many departments and faculties have internal eligibility criteria, review and approval processes, and other guidelines. Applicants are advised to consult their research support team at an early stage in their planning, not least to ensure they comply with these.

8. What can be funded?

Eligible costs do **not** include salary of Research or Policy Partners, but include those related to:

- Salaries of other staff, e.g., research support, communications or events management staff
- Travel and subsistence costs for researchers, external partners or delegates
- Event costs, including venue hire, AV services, transcription, and catering (max £30 catering costs per person for a full day event; pro-rated for shorter events; alcoholic drinks are not an eligible cost).
- Consultancy/professional fees for external partners
- Equipment, capped at 5% of funds requested

All project activity must be completed and funding spent by 30 June 2026.

Support from the Seed Fund is not provided on a full economic cost (FEC) basis. Estates and indirect costs are not covered by the fund but 100% of direct costs will be covered. More information about costing and pricing projects is available [here](#). All expenses must be in line with the [University's Expenses policy](#).

Efficiency, cost-effectiveness and value for money should be clearly demonstrated in the application. Payments will not be made for miscellaneous expenses or unspecified items. If you are unsure about the eligibility of a specific expense, please contact researchandpublicpolicy@admin.ox.ac.uk for further guidance.

Clear details of any combination of cash or in-kind contributions are sought from both partners to reflect shared commitment to the proposed partnership. **The contribution of policy partners is expected to equate to at least 10% of funds requested from the Seed Fund.**

9. When to apply

Prospective partners may apply for

- Less than £1,000 at any time between 0900 GMT on 19 September 2025 and 1200 BST on 18 May 2026; and
- Between £1,000 to £5,000 ahead of the gathered field deadlines of 1200 BST on 10 November 2025 and 23 February 2026.

Applicants applying for less than £1,000 can expect to hear of panel decisions within 10 working days.

In exceptional circumstances and with adequate justification, applications for more than £5,000 may be considered. Partners considering such an application should consult the Policy Engagement Team at an early stage.

10. How to apply

Researchers are encouraged to [join OPEN](#) before applying.

Proposals must be submitted using the University's [Internal Research Award Management System \(IRAMS\)](#), to which only the Research Partner has access. This is a four-part process:

1. Complete the online section of the application in IRAMS
2. Download the Case for Support Word document template from IRAMS, to be completed in collaboration with the Policy Partner
3. Combine the Case for Support with the other supporting documents into a single PDF.
4. Upload the single PDF to IRAMS, which should comprise:
 - a. Case for Support, with all relevant fields completed; and
 - b. Statement of support from a senior representative of the Policy Partner's employer

The Research Partner should check with their department or faculty to clarify any internal eligibility criteria, approval processes, and other guidelines. Some departments require significant notice to check and submit proposals, so Research Partners should seek guidance from their departmental administrator as soon as they consider making an application.

Costing

The online application form in IRAMS requires a financial breakdown of the project. For each budget line please describe the costs being requested in the corresponding 'Description' field, and if appropriate, provide a justification. Once the 'Purpose' is entered for three budget lines, more budget lines will become available on the online form.

Please see the 'Key dates' section for details of the earliest start date for projects between £1,000 and £5,000 in value. Earlier start dates for such projects, and for all proposals of less than £1,000 in value, must be agreed in consultation with the Policy Engagement Team.

Projects must be completed and all funds spent by 30 June 2026, so all costs must be attributed to Year 1 only. No extensions can be given after this date.

Departmental/faculty approval

Applications are automatically submitted to the PI's department for approval via IRAMS. Subject to their approval, applications then go to the OPEN Seed Fund manager who will share it with the panel.

Where proposals include staff time for researchers based in a different department to the PI, a statement of support should be provided by all departments involved.

Applicants should check with their department for internal approval procedures and deadlines. Some departments require significant notice to check and submit proposals, so applicants are advised to seek guidance from their departmental administrator as soon as they consider making an application.

Case for Support

The Research Partner should download the Case for Support from IRAMS and complete together with their Policy Partner all relevant sections. Detailed instructions for completing the Case for Support are included in the form.

The Research Partner should consult their departmental administrator about the preparation of costings. The department or faculty is responsible for confirming the accuracy of those costings. Funding for any project activities not funded through the OPEN Seed Fund should be confirmed, or confirmed on the condition of your proposal being successful, at the time of applying. All project activity must be completed and funding spent by 30 June 2026.

Statement of support

A letter (or email) of support (max. 400 words) should be provided by a senior representative of the Policy Partner's organisation. This should

- Summarise the nature of the public policy challenge that the project aims to tackle;
- Reflect an understanding of the proposed goal, outcomes, outputs and activities
- Specify their role in the proposed activities and outputs, and achievement of proposed outcomes and goal
- Describe how the proposed goal relates to the policymaking agenda and how the proposed partnership will benefit the Policy Partner and, possibly, their colleagues
- Indicate how they expect to benefit from the engagement (e.g., in terms of learning, or deepening networks)
- Outline the support that will be provided

In cases where obtaining such a statement is particularly difficult at the proposal stage, the panel may consider applications without one, and subsequently offer a conditional award, pending provision of such a letter.

11. *Sharing best practice*

Successful applicants may be invited by the University or Policy Profession to take part in briefing, training or other events that support the aims of the Seed Fund.

Applicants should note that successful applications are likely to be used as exemplars for future applicants but an opportunity to opt-out of this will be available.

In addition to any publications that may be delivered through their partnership, successful applicants will be invited to help the Policy Engagement Team prepare a short lay summary of their project for publication via University channels and others at their discretion.

12. Monitoring, evaluation and learning

Applicants are encouraged to consult the [Policy Engagement Team's guidance and resources relating to monitoring, evaluation and learning](#) and are expected to outline relevant arrangements in their case for support.

Throughout their project, Partners will be supported by the Policy Engagement Team to maximise learning from their experience and share this with others. Research Partners will have the opportunity to:

- Participate in a cohort-gathering for new OPEN award-holders at the start of their project (either in January and April 2026)
- Share their experience with other OPEN members at a networking event in July 2026
- Share their learnings with others, e.g. in the context of training activities or resources, or in the form of a blog
- Communicate project activities and progress via OPEN's online presence and social media accounts.

The Policy Engagement Team will work with Partners, individually and as a cohort, to

- Maximise learning from their experience, and in finding ways to share that with others, e.g. in the context of training activities or resources, or in the form of a blog; and
- Communicate progress towards outcomes, planned or unplanned, including via the team's online presence and social media.

Reporting requirements

Timely consideration of arrangement for monitoring, evaluation and learning will also facilitate and inform the reporting that is required of all award-holders. These reports will be the key mechanism to collect critical information for reporting to Research England, and will assist the Policy Engagement Team in monitoring progress and managing any issues that arise.

A schedule of reporting dates will be provided with award offer letters. Research Partners will be contacted with an email reminder closer to the dates that reports are due for submission. The emails will include a number of questions to help shape reports:

- **End-of-project report** – This should evaluate the project, demonstrate the impact and benefits for Research and Policy Partners, and detail any future plans for further engagement. This report should be submitted within one month of the end of the project.
- **Impact report** – This should briefly outline further impacts achieved in the six months following the project's completion. The aim is to capture any impact that has developed since the project's completion date.

13. Where to get support

All applicants are strongly encouraged to contact the Policy Engagement Team (researchandpublicpolicy@admin.ox.ac.uk) to discuss ideas for a potential application, as well as for advice on eligibility criteria, potential hosts at Oxford or in the policymaking community, and other related questions. The relevant divisional lead from the table below will respond.

Division	Contact
Gardens, Libraries and Museums Mathematical, Physical and Life Sciences	Jess Hedge (jessica.hedge@socsci.ox.ac.uk)
Humanities	Will Pryor (william.pryor@socsci.ox.ac.uk)
Medical Sciences	Naomi Gibson (naomi.gibson@medsci.ox.ac.uk)
Social Sciences	Noora Kanfash (noora.kanfash@socsci.ox.ac.uk)

Researcher applicants are encouraged to consult their departmental research support team in the first instance, not least to ensure they comply with any departmental eligibility criteria, approval processes, or guidelines.

14. Guidance and resources

Please find below information and guidance from the Policy Engagement Team and others at Oxford:

- From the University's Policy Engagement Team:
 - [How can I engage with policymakers?](#)
 - [How does UK Government work and what do policymakers look for?](#)
 - [How do I engage with the UK Parliament and how do parliaments work?](#)
 - [How do I build policy engagement into project design?](#)
 - [How do I engage with policymakers internationally?](#)
 - [How do I monitor, evaluate and learn about policy engagement?](#)
- From elsewhere:
 - [ESRC Impact Toolkit](#)
 - ['Guidance on Planning and demonstrating Effective Policy Engagement'](#) (Arts & Humanities Research Council)
 - ['How to engage with policy makers: a guide for academics in the arts and humanities'](#) (Institute for Government, Arts & Humanities Research Council)
 - [Policy Impact: A 'how to guide' for researchers](#) (University of Cambridge)
 - [Research England's Knowledge Exchange pages](#)
 - ['Routes to Policy Impact: A Practical Guide for Academics and Researchers'](#) (University of Nottingham)
 - [Science for Policy Handbook](#) (Elsevier)
 - ['Engaging with local government: A Guide for Academics'](#) (University of Cambridge)
 - [Engaging with evidence toolkit](#) (Nesta, Capabilities in Academic Policy Engagement and Chief Scientific Adviser's Office at the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities)
 - [Engaging with academics: guide for policy makers](#) (Government Office for Science)

15. Get inspired!

- [Researcher Stories: Policy Engagement](#) – short videos of policy-engaged researchers at Oxford and their policy partners, including some of who have been funded through the OPEN Seed Fund
- [Oxford's Experience in Policy Engagement](#) – news, stories, and advice from policy-engaged academics at Oxford
- [Social Sciences Division impact case studies](#) – lay summaries of successful impact stories
- [ESRC IAA funded project summaries](#) – short summaries of projects funded to date
- [TORCH KE Fellowships and other projects](#) – run by the Humanities Division
- [Oxford Impacts case study series](#)
- [Oxford's KE and Impact pages](#)
- [ESRC Celebrating Impact Prize](#) - watch winners' impact videos
- [ESRC Impact case studies](#) – read case studies or watch videos
- [Universities Policy Engagement Network](#) (blog)